

KANDINSKY



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W. KANDINSKY

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KANDINSKY

BERLIN was talking about it. About what? Everybody was asking. Why, the new wall decorations which Kandinsky had designed, and his pupils at the Academy at Weimar had executed. Was it true that Kandinsky was at Weimar? Weimar, the town of Goethe, the city of tradition!

I WENT to see these much-talked of decorations — large black hangings made for the entrance hall of the new Art Building which the group of moderns in Germany hope to erect in Berlin. They were perfectly placed in this octangular room resembling an entrance hall. They carried you into space, and you could see the black and white marble checkered floor, and the imposing portal through which one would have to come. It was all very complete.

THE following day I took the train to Weimar, and that same evening had the pleasure of sharing a cup of tea with Kandinsky and his wife in their apartment. I was in no way disappointed. Kandinsky, the man whose work I had followed with interest for ten years, whose book on the "Art of Spiritual Harmony" had helped to clarify many vague thoughts, which had formulated themselves with regard to art during my intensive studies at Munich, the winter of 1911-12, had the calmness and poise I had hoped to find. He seemed to stand above life. He controlled Destiny. In spite of the hardship which he had had to encounter the past years, the lack of nourishment which everybody in central Europe or Russia has had to face, which now really is a part of the every day life of those countries, all this had simply clarified his spiritual vision. The great material loss which he had sustained in Germany through the sale of his pictures, and the drop of the Mark, he



1913

only saw with humor, not bitterness. Life was unfolding itself with the same intensity and richness at the age of fifty-six, as it had earlier.

WE talked of many things in the three days that we were together, and I could not give a better picture of his personality than to translate liberally and quote freely from his biographical sketch, which was published in Berlin in 1913 by "Der Sturm."

KANDINSKY was born in Moscow approximately fifty odd years ago. His earliest recollection at the age of three was color, brilliant green, white, carmine red, black and yellow ochre. Color always registered more strongly than form. At a very early age he was taken on a long trip to Italy with his parents and his aunt Elizabeth Ticheeff, to whom he owed so much of the spiritual development of his life. His father's family came from east Siberia, where his ancestors had been sent because of political reasons, and whence as a youth he came to Moscow.

Here he met and married Kandinsky's mother, who typified the soul of Moscow for Kandinsky, the son. His description of her must be given in full: "She embodied a personal beauty of strength and earnestness, of high breeding, of untiring energy, based on a strong nervous and impressive quietness, woven in with a stoic self-control, and the tradition of true freedom. In short, in bodily form, she was the 'marble, gold-headed, Mother Moscow'."

BECAUSE of the ill health of the father, shortly after their return from Italy, the family migrated to Odessa, in southern Russia. There Kandinsky attended the high school, but the yearly visits to Moscow with his father, and the devoted love of the entire family towards Moscow, made him feel that he was returning at last to his real home, when as a lad of eighteen, he entered the University there.

HIS father, noticing his love for drawing, permitted him to take lessons in this subject already, during his period of high school. With the increasing years, his love for art caused his interest in politics and law to wane, for art alone had the power to free him from time and space.

DURING his University career he joined the students' movement against the University law of 1885, but fortunately did not become entirely submerged in the political movement, from which his love of art restrained him. He took his degree in Roman and Russian law, which subjects were especially vital at that time, because of the greater emancipation of the Russian peasant, who were now able to elect their own judges. At this time, the theories of Lombrosos were also beginning to be much discussed and were affecting all of Europe in connection with the criminal law. His study of national economy under that rare man, Prof. A. J. Tchuproff, enchanted and completely absorbed him. After his degree in law had been won, he was sent by the Society of Natural History, Anthropology and Ethnology to Wologda, where he was to report on the criminal law affecting the Russian peasant, as well as to report on the fast-disappearing primitive religion existing there in a group of fisherfolk and huntsmen of Syrian abstraction.

IN the latter half of the 19th century, the same attitude towards art apparently existed throughout the entire western civilization. Art through its realism had laid the hand of death on the influence it formerly had exerted upon the people. In consequence one finds the attitude throughout the entire western civilization, towards art as of no importance. Persons of intelligence were expected not to devote themselves to art, but rather to law or science. Strangely enough it was the attitude in the Roman law which em-

phasized the spirit which eventually brought the freedom necessary to Kandinsky. Being brought up on the tradition of realism in art, Kandinsky's first view of the Impressionist's Exhibition at Moscow came as a tremendous shock and surprise. The picture that registered most deeply on him was Claude Monet's famous "Haystack." He resented the inability to recognize the haystack, he resented the broken atoms which were rendered in this painting, but what came as the greatest surprise to him was the realization that he could not forget this picture. It awakened and brought to life all his hidden strength of color. Painting once more became an enchanting power. The early experiences of the sensation of Moscow in late afternoon which had so thrilled him and engrossed him, and which seemed impossible to ever be rendered in paint, had found a little of its way into this canvas. This, with a second important experience of hearing Wagner's Lohengrin, made him conscious of the fact that art is more powerful than he or those about him realized; and that painting could have the same power as music. To seek for these powers in painting, appeared an impossibility which was very bitter.

NEXT came the scientific realization that apparently solid matter was composed of atoms. The breaking up into atoms of apparently solid apparitions, destroyed the whole positive world for him. If a stone would have disappeared into the air in his presence, he would not have been astonished. Science seemed to have been destroyed, her importance as a base, seemed only an illusion. An impediment was destroyed.

I N a trip to St. Petersburg, he was deeply affected by coming into contact with Rembrandt at The Hermitage. The great division of light and dark, the disappearing and reappearing of secondary colors, the



1922

Kandinsky

melting together of colors, reminded him of the trumpets of Wagner and revealed new possibilities. The division of space which Rembrandt introduced, the consciousness of color in its depths which revealed itself with time, made him realize that Rembrandt had introduced a new element on to the canvas — time. This process of time he desired to imprison in his own work. The hidden colors should reveal themselves not instantaneously. Only through time could the on-looker become conscious of them. It was a bitter disappointment when he realized that he was practically using Rembrandt's theory, and that it was not out of his own inner strength that he was creating what he thought was a new element. He had "made cheap" by using another's method, his most beloved elementary theories — the hidden, the mysterious and the passing-time.

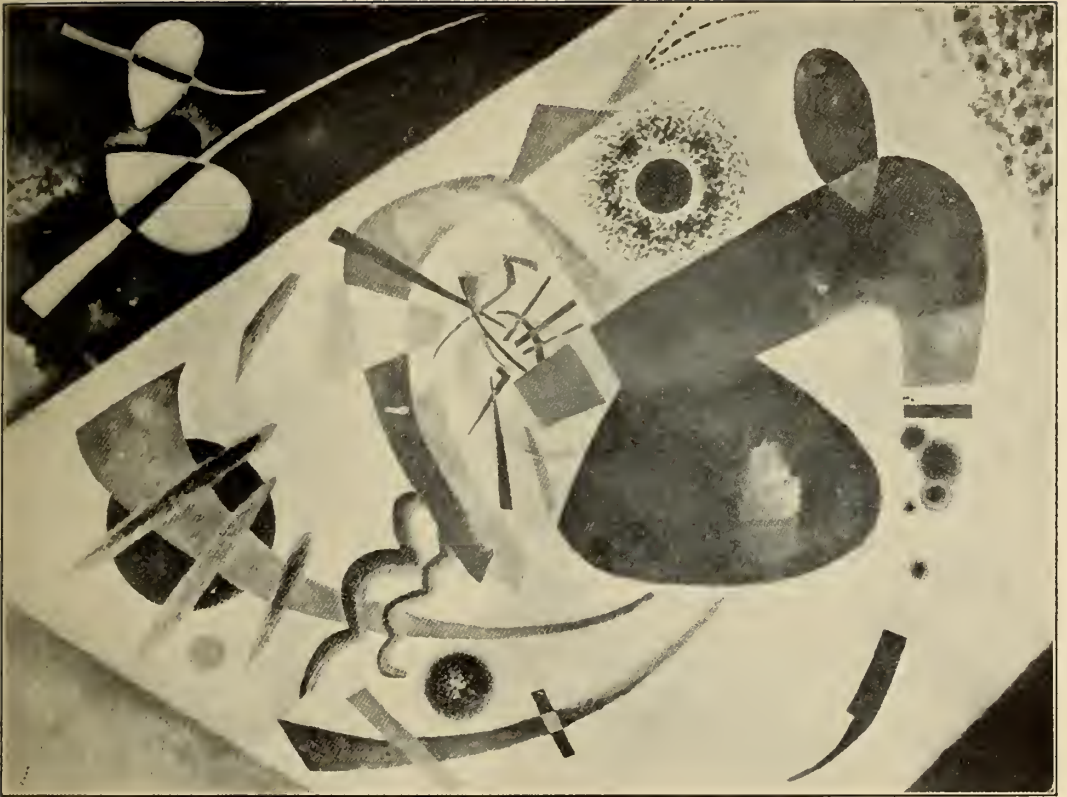
AT the time when he was making these experiments, he was studying in Munich — Munich the city of art — the city of fairy-land — they were synonymous terms which he could never separate. His preliminary years in the training of art had passed. He went to Munich to complete his studies under Franz Stuck, who was then considered the most important draftsman of Germany. Stuck, after seeing his work, advised him to spend another year in academic drawing. Again he failed to pass his examinations, for the drawings which were admired, seemed dead to him and he refused to repeat this method of work, whereas those which appeared to him to have both life and art were considered "not correct." Stuck, in spite of Kandinsky's not passing his examinations, took him into his class, but felt that his extravagance in color should be curbed, and advised him to paint in black and white.

ONE advice which Stuck gave Kandinsky, however, won for him his undying gratitude. Stuck drew attention to the fact that Kandinsky worked with too

great a nervous intensity, emphasizing immediately that which was of the greatest interest and importance in the picture, which in consequence caused him to lose the patience to complete it, and work on that which was subservient to that which was of the greatest importance. Kandinsky realized why he had never been able to complete his pictures. He went home and succeeded in accomplishing it.

HE tried during his first years in Munich, to paint landscapes. To study nature, the human figure; to study the old masters; to devote himself to what was demanded of an artist of that period. But more and more the composition appeared of most importance. Memory painting held him. He became very conscious of the gulf which separates art from nature. He was able to render most brilliantly his impressions for even at the time that he painted realistically, he always sought for the orchestration of color. It is amusing to note that the Munich critics drew attention to the fact that this love of color was the Byzantine influence which he had received during his childhood at Moscow, while the Russian critics insisted that he had been absolutely ruined by the riot of color in Munich.

THE development and refining of one's talent demands intense concentration, which influences the entire character and transposes one's ability from one line of power to another. This is especially noticeable where memory is concerned. Composition and form appeared of their own accord to the inner vision of Kandinsky. It was only with time that he learned to control and manage them — to discriminate and choose — for they appeared complete even as to arrangement; they wished to be the controlling force — but it is the artist who must retain the control — not his talent. And it is this control one is so conscious of when one personally meets Kandinsky the man.



1922

IT was the love for the "hidden" which saved Kandinsky from ever being unduly influenced by folk art which came to him with overpowering vigor at a very impressionable age when at the close of his student life he took the trip to the Wologda. It was an amazing experience, for he felt himself a part of the picture into which he had stepped — but to quote: "I remember how, when for the first time I stepped into this room and unexpectedly stopped in front of the picture which it revealed. The table, the benches, the important Russian stove, the cupboard, and each article with its glowing colorful ornamentation. Folk pictures on the walls, the hero in symbolic attitude, the battle, a painted folk song. 'The red' corner, entirely covered with holy pictures, in front of which a small red lamp hung burning . . . When at last I entered the room, I felt surrounded on all sides by painting — I was in the picture."

PERHAPS it was this impression which awakened the desire to aim at the sensation of permitting the on-looker to enter his pictures, to permit him to walk into them, to disappear within their world. It was only later that he became conscious of the small group to whom this was possible, but to them it is — the wall expands — another world is reached.

THE danger of the ornament which Americans find especially hard to avoid — Kandinsky has mastered and controlled. He saw the danger from the beginning. He speaks of his love of "the hidden," the mysterious, the quality of time. It was the love for these qualities which made him give years of patient work and exhausting thought, make endless attempts on canvas to answer the question: "What shall take the place of objects?" For objects as well as ornaments hold danger and can bring the thoughtless painter down to the level of virtuosity — something most men despise in music — why not in painting?

HOW Kandinsky solved this great problem as to what shall replace the subject matter in painting, is most brilliantly illustrated by his present exhibition at the Societe Anonyme this season, the result of my trip to Weimar. How his clarification has grown is also clearly brought forth by studying his earlier painting of 1913, as reproduced here, with his latest work of 1921 and 1922. But he never would have reached this clarification if he had not felt that fundamentally art has much in common with religion. "The development does not exist in new discoveries which destroy the old, as it appears in science. The development of art exists in the sudden illumination of a deeper meaning or a deeper possibility. As Christ said that he had not come to destroy the 'laws or the prophet, he came not to destroy but to fulfill.' In this way he expanded the material law and introduced the spiritual law. He took the material law of Moses which said, 'Thou shalt not kill — thou shalt not commit adultery,' and introduced the abstract or spiritual interpretation . . . In this lies the increasing extension of value in words, which uninterrupted even today slowly develops from the selfsame roots a greater richness. It is the same in the line of art."

IN this way Kandinsky at last reached, as he studied and searched, the abstract. It was only natural therefore that eventually he should become the leader in Munich in 1911 of the group called "Die Blauen Reiter" who felt with him, that the time had come to place the emphasis on color and that color eventually would mean to the eye what music does to the ear.

I LEFT Weimar thankful that I was alive today with eyes to see and ears to hear the wonders that our age reveals.

KATHERINE S. DREIER.

March, 1923.

